Conspiracy Theorist's Guide to CIA Portrayals in Hollywood

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June 20, 2023

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has long been a subject of fascination and speculation in popular culture, not least in the realm of Hollywood. This essay delves into the portrayal of the CIA in thirteen notable films and television series, viewing them through the lens of a conspiracy theorist. These narratives, rooted in themes of surveillance, corruption, manipulation, and secrecy, offer intriguing perspectives on the alleged activities of this enigmatic agency. While these cinematic works are largely fictional, they nonetheless provide a rich canvas upon which to explore and question the covert operations of one of the world's most powerful intelligence agencies.

Films: The Good Shepherd (2006), The Manchurian Candidate (1962 & 2004), Three Days of the Condor (1975), Syriana (2005), Argo (2012), American Made (2017), Jason Bourne series (2002–2016), Enemy of the State (1998), Confessions of a Dangerous Mind (2002), Safe House (2012), Zero Dark Thirty (2012), Kill the Messenger (2014), Condor (2018-).

The Good Shepherd is a compelling exploration of the cryptic and shadowy world of the Central Intelligence Agency during its formative years, placing a strong emphasis on the agency's clandestine activities and alleged manipulations.

The narrative is framed around the character Edward Wilson, played by Matt Damon, a dedicated public servant who is among the first to join the CIA. From the paranoid conspiracy theorist's point of view, Wilson embodies the prototypical spy, dedicated to his mission but morally compromised by the nature of his work. He becomes an operative in a world where truth is elusive, trust is transient, and every alliance could be a potential double-cross. The agency is depicted as a vast, manipulative entity that trades in secrets, deception, and subterfuge.

The film's portrayal of the CIA’s involvement in the Bay of Pigs Invasion — a botched attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro’s regime in Cuba — provides fodder for conspiracy theorists. It suggests a tangled web of international manipulation, backdoor dealings, and tragic miscalculations. This event is often associated with conspiracy theories involving the CIA, some of which propose that the agency intentionally sacrificed the mission as part of a larger, more nefarious plan.

The Good Shepherd also insinuates the idea that the agency's operatives are everywhere, silently shaping the course of world events. The film depicts the CIA's operations as an invisible, omnipresent force, pulling strings behind the scenes and altering the lives of those both within and outside its sphere of influence. This would resonate with conspiracy theorists who believe in the omnipresence of the CIA and its invisible hand in global events.

Ultimately, "The Good Shepherd" presents a vision of the CIA steeped in secrecy, moral ambiguity, and Machiavellian

machinations, reinforcing many of the archetypal images that conspiracy theorists might hold regarding the agency.

The Manchurian Candidate both in its original 1962 version and the 2004 remake, delves into the dark realm of mind control and political manipulation, themes that are central to many conspiracy theories about the CIA. While the films don't explicitly mention the CIA as the antagonist, they resonate strongly with theories about the agency's alleged involvement in covert psychological operations, most notably the MK-Ultra project that aimed to research mind control and chemical interrogation methods.

The narrative revolves around the concept of an individual being brainwashed to become an unwitting political assassin, a notion that strikes at the heart of many conspiracy theories. It hints at the possibility of unseen forces pulling the strings of power, controlling not just political narratives, but individuals themselves. The chilling prospect that one's autonomy can be subverted by hidden powers echoes the fear and paranoia central to many conspiracy theories.

In the original film, the brainwashing is orchestrated by communists, mirroring the Cold War fears of the time. In the 2004 version, the manipulation is executed by a nefarious corporation, reflecting modern anxieties about the growing influence of corporate entities in politics. Both scenarios mirror fears about the CIA - in the first, the agency is seen as a potential weapon against communist manipulation; in the second, it's seen as potentially entwined with powerful corporate interests.

Moreover, the movies' portrayal of a political landscape where nothing is as it seems, where reality can be manufactured and manipulated, aligns with the worldview of many conspiracy

theorists. It feeds into the narrative of secret government projects, brainwashing, and the idea of the state as a puppeteer, themes that are prevalent in many conspiracy theories about the CIA.

Through these lenses, "The Manchurian Candidate" can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the fears and suspicions about the potential for misuse of power within shadowy intelligence agencies such as the CIA, whether it's mind control, political manipulation, or the agency serving interests other than those of the public.

Three Days of the Condor is a suspenseful thriller that delves into the labyrinthine and murky world of the Central Intelligence Agency, presenting a chilling narrative that would resonate with a conspiracy theorist's viewpoint. The film, centered on a CIA researcher, Joseph Turner (played by Robert Redford), unwittingly caught in a deadly web of internal corruption and conspiracy, explores themes of betrayal, paranoia, and the sinister machinations of an entity ostensibly dedicated to national security.

The film begins with an act of unimaginable horror: Turner returns from lunch to find all his co-workers brutally murdered. This single act of violence pulls back the curtain on a conspiracy that reaches to the highest echelons of the agency, suggesting the existence of a secretive and ruthless faction within the CIA itself. From a paranoid conspiracy theorist's perspective, this horrifying event could be interpreted as an extreme measure to suppress vital information, implying that the CIA would go to unthinkable lengths to maintain secrecy and control.

As Turner becomes a marked man, hunted by his own organization, the film further compounds the image of the CIA as a formidable and omnipotent entity capable of widespread

surveillance and lethal efficiency. Turner is forced into a cat-and-mouse game against an agency seemingly capable of manipulating every aspect of his life, with nowhere to hide and no one to trust.

The notion of a 'deep state', a body within the government operating outside of the democratic system and pursuing its own shadowy agenda, is a common trope in conspiracy theories. "Three Days of the Condor" embodies this idea through its depiction of a rogue faction within the CIA. The agency is shown not just as an organization prone to internal corruption and power struggles, but as a complex, impenetrable entity whose motives and actions are hidden from the public eye.

"Three Days of the Condor" offers a vision of the CIA that could readily be seen as validating the anxieties and suspicions of conspiracy theorists: a powerful, inscrutable organization with the capability and willingness to execute devastating actions in pursuit of its cryptic objectives.

Syriana is a labyrinthine geopolitical drama that intricately weaves together the worlds of energy trade, government agencies, global finance, and Middle Eastern politics. It presents a multifaceted depiction of the interplay between these entities, offering a perspective that, from the viewpoint of a paranoid conspiracy theorist, implicates the CIA in far-reaching geopolitical machinations and illicit activities.

The narrative features multiple interconnected storylines, one of which involves a seasoned CIA operative, Bob Barnes, played by George Clooney. Barnes is portrayed as a pawn caught up in the vast chessboard of geopolitics, manipulated by unseen forces within the agency. He becomes embroiled in a plot to assassinate

a reform-minded prince in an unnamed Middle Eastern country, a mission that goes catastrophically awry.

The film, in essence, asserts that control over oil — the lifeblood of the global economy — is a central motive for a broad range of covert activities. To a conspiracy theorist, this could be interpreted as suggesting that the CIA, acting on behalf of certain economic and political interests, engages in subversion, destabilization, and even assassination to secure control over valuable resources.

Moreover, the film's portrayal of the CIA and U.S. government as deeply entwined with the global oil industry could feed into conspiracy theories about shadowy alliances between government agencies and powerful corporations. The film suggests that geopolitical decisions, rather than being made in the interest of national security or global stability, are heavily influenced by the desire to control oil reserves, reaffirming the narrative of a global elite manipulating world events for their gain.

In the end, "Syriana" paints a bleak picture of the world where power, wealth, and geopolitical control are intimately interconnected. From a conspiracy theorist's perspective, this film might be seen as evidence of their suspicions, a cinematic confirmation of the covert, self-serving actions they believe the CIA and similar entities are willing to undertake.

Argo based on a true story, recounts the daring and ingenious operation by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to rescue six American diplomats from Tehran during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. While the film primarily portrays the CIA in a positive light, demonstrating the agency's capability and resourcefulness, a paranoid conspiracy theorist might extrapolate and interpret the events depicted in the film through a different lens.

From this perspective, "Argo" provides an illuminating glimpse into the clandestine operations of the CIA. The central plot involves the agency concocting a cover story for the diplomats — they are to pose as a Canadian film crew scouting locations for a science fiction film. To a conspiracy theorist, this could be viewed as a testament to the lengths the CIA is willing to go to achieve its objectives, weaving intricate webs of deception and going so far as to create a fake movie production, complete with script, director, and press coverage.

Furthermore, the agency's willingness to manipulate media and international perceptions for the sake of their operations might resonate with conspiracy theories concerning the CIA's alleged control over media narratives. From fabricating a movie to managing international relations (particularly, the collaboration with the Canadian government presented in the film), the CIA is portrayed as an organization with the resources and the will to shape reality to suit its objectives.

Though the mission in "Argo" is undeniably heroic and its outcome successful, a conspiracy theorist could latch onto the film's portrayal of the agency's operations as validation of their beliefs about the CIA's reach and manipulative capabilities. They might see it as indicative of a wider pattern of deception, manipulation, and control that extends beyond the specific context of crisis response. From this perspective, "Argo" offers a compelling, albeit skewed, confirmation of the conspiracy theorist's view of the CIA.

American Made is a fast-paced, action-filled film that delves into the life of Barry Seal, a commercial pilot turned drug smuggler, and later, a government informant. The narrative implicates the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in illicit activities, specifically

drug trafficking during the 1980s, a claim that has been a subject of significant controversy and debate.

From the perspective of a paranoid conspiracy theorist, "American Made" offers a compelling narrative that dovetails with theories about the CIA's involvement in illegal activities. The film portrays Seal, played by Tom Cruise, as a pawn used by the CIA to conduct covert operations in Central and South America, with the agency turning a blind eye to his drug trafficking activities in exchange for his services.

The film dives headlong into the murky waters of the Iran-Contra affair, a political scandal during the Reagan administration, which involved selling arms to Iran (then under an arms embargo) to fund the Contras in Nicaragua. This is a historical event often cited by conspiracy theorists who allege that the CIA has been involved in drug trafficking.

"American Made" presents a version of the CIA that operates outside of the law, engaging in activities that, on the surface, appear contradictory to its mission. The agency is shown as manipulative and opportunistic, exploiting Seal's aviation skills for its covert operations while tacitly permitting his involvement in drug trafficking.

The depiction of the CIA in "American Made" could resonate strongly with conspiracy theorists who suspect the agency of engaging in illicit activities, serving hidden agendas, and orchestrating large-scale operations beyond public scrutiny. By showcasing a narrative where the CIA is involved in drug trafficking, the film might be interpreted by conspiracy theorists as evidence of the agency's willingness to compromise legal and ethical boundaries for strategic gains.

Jason Bourne series spanning five films from 2002 to 2016, delves deep into the shadowy realm of clandestine operations purportedly orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The narrative is built around Jason Bourne, a former CIA assassin suffering from amnesia, trying to uncover the truth about his past. The films are packed with themes that would pique the interest of conspiracy theorists, such as covert assassination programs, mind control, extreme surveillance, and rampant corruption within the agency.

From a conspiracy theorist's perspective, the "Jason Bourne" series is a treasure trove of supposed 'revelations' about the CIA's capabilities and alleged illicit activities. Bourne himself is a product of "Operation Treadstone," a secret program that trains assassins using psychological manipulation and behavioral modification techniques. This aligns with conspiracy theories about the CIA's involvement in mind control experiments, most famously the real-life MK-Ultra project.

As Bourne digs deeper into his past, he uncovers a web of deceit, corruption, and illicit activities at the highest levels of the CIA. This depiction of internal corruption and conspiracy within the agency, operating under a cloak of national security, feeds directly into the narrative of a so-called 'deep state' that operates outside the boundaries of law and democratic oversight.

The series also delves into the theme of surveillance, depicting a world where the CIA has an almost omniscient ability to track and monitor individuals. This portrayal echoes real-world concerns and conspiracy theories about government invasion of privacy, bulk data collection, and the potential for misuse of such information.

In sum, the "Jason Bourne" series offers a potent vision of the CIA as a rogue agency involved in everything from assassination

and mind control to global surveillance. For a conspiracy theorist, these films could provide 'confirmation' of their deepest fears about the agency's reach and alleged disregard for legal and ethical constraints. While these movies are, of course, works of fiction and should be viewed as such, they tap into prevalent fears about unchecked power and clandestine activities within intelligence agencies.

Enemy of the State although primarily focusing on the National Security Agency (NSA), is a high-stakes thriller that delves into the pervasive and potentially invasive nature of government surveillance. This theme of unbridled monitoring and manipulation by a government agency could be readily extrapolated by a paranoid conspiracy theorist to encompass the workings of other intelligence agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The film centers around Robert Clayton Dean (played by Will Smith), a lawyer who unwittingly becomes embroiled in a lethal political conspiracy when he comes into possession of a tape that shows a congressman's assassination. From that moment, he becomes a target of the NSA, which deploys an array of sophisticated surveillance tools to track and discredit him, intruding into every facet of his personal life.

The depiction of the NSA's reach and technological prowess in "Enemy of the State" can feed into conspiracy theories about government surveillance capabilities. The movie demonstrates how agencies could potentially manipulate information, frame innocent people, and even control aspects of an individual's life without their knowledge. The narrative underscores the idea that privacy may be an illusion in the face of advanced surveillance technology.

For a conspiracy theorist, "Enemy of the State" could represent an extrapolation of their fears about intelligence agencies like the CIA. The film paints a picture of a world where these agencies are all-seeing, all-knowing entities with scant regard for personal privacy or civil liberties. This aligns with a paranoid perspective where intelligence agencies are believed to wield their power with minimal oversight and potentially sinister motives.

Overall, while "Enemy of the State" specifically portrays the NSA, the issues it raises – privacy invasion, government overreach, and the potential for misuse of power – are themes that echo conspiracy theories about various intelligence agencies, including the CIA. From a conspiracy theorist's viewpoint, this film may seem to confirm their worst fears about unchecked surveillance and manipulation by covert agencies.

Confessions of a Dangerous Mind is a darkly comic, surreal film based on the "unauthorized autobiography" of Chuck Barris, a popular television game show host who made the shocking claim of having been a CIA assassin while leading his public life. The film, directed by George Clooney, takes viewers on a wild ride through Barris' ostensible double life, blurring the lines between fact and fiction.

From a conspiracy theorist's perspective, "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind" could be a gold mine. The idea of a game show host moonlighting as a government operative is an enticing narrative that suggests the CIA has the ability to plant agents in seemingly innocuous public roles, concealing their covert operations in plain sight. This feeds directly into theories that posit the existence of 'sleepers' or undercover agents in ordinary professions, ready to be activated at any moment.

As Barris (played by Sam Rockwell) gets drawn deeper into the world of espionage, the film portrays the CIA as an organization that manipulates and controls its operatives, even dictating their personal relationships. Barris' handler, Jim Byrd (played by George Clooney), is a shadowy figure who appears and disappears at will, pulling Barris' strings and manipulating him into carrying out assassinations. This depiction aligns with conspiracy theories about the agency's alleged disregard for individual freedom and autonomy.

Additionally, the film plays with the concept of media manipulation. The idea that a popular television personality could be a CIA operative suggests that media, in this narrative, could be a tool for intelligence agencies to distract the public, whilst their operatives carry out covert missions. This could be seen as confirmation of theories about the intelligence community's control over mass media.

While "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind" is largely considered a work of fiction – the CIA has denied Barris' claims – it presents a captivating narrative that could be perceived by conspiracy theorists as proof of their beliefs about the covert operations, media manipulation, and the ubiquity of intelligence operatives in everyday life.

Safe House plunges into the shadowy world of espionage, illustrating a story about a rogue CIA agent, Tobin Frost (played by Denzel Washington), who stumbles upon and exposes evidence of the agency's illegal activities. This tense thriller unwinds against the backdrop of a safe house in Cape Town, where Frost is detained under the custody of a young CIA agent, Matt Weston (played by Ryan Reynolds).

From the vantage point of a paranoid conspiracy theorist, "Safe House" reinforces the notion that the CIA operates with significant

autonomy, often stepping outside the law in pursuit of its objectives. Tobin Frost, once a highly respected intelligence officer, turns rogue after discovering a digital file containing evidence of the agency's involvement in various illicit operations. The data Frost uncovers illuminates a dark underbelly of corruption, illegal dealings, and clandestine operations, feeding into the narrative that the CIA is riddled with internal corruption and engages in covert unlawful actions.

Additionally, the film portrays the lengths the CIA is willing to go to protect its secrets and reputation. When Frost is hunted by a group of mercenaries eager to obtain the compromising data, the CIA is seen as willing to abandon and even eliminate one of its own to safeguard its interests. This narrative lends weight to conspiracy theories about the agency's alleged disregard for human life and its single-minded focus on achieving its goals, regardless of ethical boundaries.

Moreover, the young agent, Matt Weston, symbolizes the struggle of an individual caught up in the machinations of the agency. He is initially naive, but as he uncovers the extent of the agency's transgressions, he experiences a crisis of conscience, a classic theme that resonates with conspiracy theorists who often believe there are insiders attempting to expose the truth.

Thus, "Safe House" could be interpreted by conspiracy theorists as a piece of 'evidence' pointing to their beliefs about the CIA's willingness to engage in unlawful activities, its readiness to cover up its misdemeanors, and its capacity to betray its own agents for self-preservation. Though it is a work of fiction, the themes it touches upon might be seen as reinforcing certain conspiratorial worldviews.

Zero Dark Thirty directed by Kathryn Bigelow, offers an intense, dramatized account of the decade-long hunt for Osama bin Laden, culminating in his eventual assassination by the U.S. Navy SEAL Team 6 in 2011. While the film has been lauded for its gripping storytelling and realism, it has also drawn significant controversy for its depiction of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) use of torture, or 'enhanced interrogation techniques', in its relentless pursuit of bin Laden.

From a conspiracy theorist's perspective, especially one wary of the purported extent of the CIA's powers and methods, "Zero Dark Thirty" could serve as evidence of their beliefs. The film not only implicates the CIA in using morally questionable techniques but also suggests that such practices were crucial in extracting the intelligence that led to bin Laden.

The scenes of harsh interrogations, including waterboarding, could confirm a conspiracy theorist's suspicion about the extent to which the agency is willing to push legal and ethical boundaries to achieve its objectives. It presents a portrait of the CIA as an entity operating in the murky shadows of legality, seemingly unbound by conventional norms of law and order, and unafraid to use any means necessary to protect national security.

Moreover, the film shows the relentless pursuit by Maya (played by Jessica Chastain), a dedicated CIA analyst, depicting a single-minded, almost fanatical dedication to the mission. While Maya is portrayed as a hero, a conspiracy theorist might view such dogged determination as a manifestation of the agency's alleged obsession with control and dominance.

While "Zero Dark Thirty" does prompt a serious discussion about the ethics of certain intelligence-gathering methods, a paranoid conspiracy theorist might take these depictions further as 'proof' of their beliefs about the CIA's presumed willingness to transgress

legal and moral limits. The narrative of the film could fuel the belief that the agency operates outside the boundaries of conventional law enforcement, utilizing any means, however controversial, to achieve its goals.

Kill the Messenger is a compelling political drama that explores the real-life story of Gary Webb, a journalist for the San Jose Mercury News, who uncovers a shocking link between the CIA and drug trafficking. Webb's investigations lead him to assert that the CIA knowingly facilitated the sale of crack cocaine in the U.S. to fund the Contras, a rebel group in Nicaragua, during the 1980s.

From a conspiracy theorist's perspective, especially one skeptical of the CIA's activities, "Kill the Messenger" could be seen as a stark confirmation of their deepest concerns. The film vividly portrays Webb's painstaking journey to expose what he believed to be the CIA's covert operations involving drug trafficking, highlighting the agency's alleged willingness to exploit illegal activities to support its geopolitical objectives.

The film shows the CIA as an omnipotent organization capable of silencing those who attempt to reveal its supposed dark operations. Webb's relentless pursuit of truth brings him into conflict not only with the CIA but also with other media organizations and the U.S. government, culminating in a vilification campaign aimed at discrediting his findings. This narrative plays into the hands of conspiracy theorists who believe that the intelligence agency has the power and influence to manipulate public perception and shield itself from accountability.

Moreover, the personal and professional downfall Webb experiences following his explosive revelations adds fuel to conspiracy theories about the lengths to which the CIA would go to suppress information that could harm its reputation. Webb's

personal life is torn apart, his journalistic integrity is questioned, and he becomes a pariah within his profession, underlining the risks faced by those who dare to challenge powerful entities.

In essence, "Kill the Messenger" provides fertile ground for conspiracy theorists. While the movie is based on real events and Webb's actual investigative reports, it portrays a narrative that aligns well with conspiracy theories about the CIA's involvement in illicit activities, its far-reaching influence, and its alleged ability to silence dissenters. It serves as a potent reminder of the daunting challenges faced by those attempting to expose the truth about powerful institutions.

Condor is a thrilling television series that draws inspiration from the 1975 film "Three Days of the Condor" and the novel "Six Days of the Condor" by James Grady. The narrative revolves around a young CIA analyst, Joe Turner (played by Max Irons), who stumbles upon a conspiracy that reaches into the very heart of the agency. This unexpected discovery puts him in a precarious situation as he becomes a target, forcing him to navigate a complex web of deception and danger.

From a conspiracy theorist's perspective, especially one that harbors distrust for the CIA, "Condor" is a bonanza of ideas that fuel their beliefs. The depiction of a conspiracy within the organization aligns with views that the CIA is a breeding ground for internal corruption and secretive plots. This narrative reinforces the notion of the agency as a Machiavellian entity, where deception, betrayal, and power plays are part and parcel of daily operations.

The series also delves into the theme of surveillance and control, as Turner is pursued by his own colleagues, becoming a pawn in a larger game. This portrayal of the agency's reach feeds into the

fears of conspiracy theorists who believe that intelligence agencies have unfettered access to personal information and can exercise control over individuals' lives.

Furthermore, the series shows Turner uncovering a plan that involves the use of a deadly virus as a biological weapon. Such a narrative might resonate with conspiracy theorists who believe in the agency's potential involvement in global pandemics or the creation and manipulation of bio-warfare agents.

The moral ambiguity of the characters, particularly within the agency, underlines a belief that the ends justify the means, a sentiment often associated with real or imagined covert organizations. This depiction could further validate conspiracy theories regarding the agency's willingness to cross ethical boundaries to achieve its objectives.

In sum, "Condor," though a work of fiction, presents a world that a conspiracy theorist might perceive as validation of their beliefs. Its themes of internal conspiracy, ubiquitous surveillance, and ethical compromise within the agency closely align with many of the concerns held by those suspicious of the CIA's activities.